



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Sixth Sunday After Trinity, July 31st, 2011

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
And of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

Some people absolutely adore rules – all rules. It doesn't matter what activities the rules govern – parliamentary debate, board games, sports – there are people who delight in learning the regulations and applying them, punctiliously.

An old friend of mine was once England's greatest living expert on Parliamentary procedure. He represented a very poor constituency, but rarely did his participation in parliamentary debates reflect a real interest in his constituents' affairs. Rather, when he spoke – which was often – it was to raise a point of order or to challenge a ruling by the Speaker or to point out a technical point that had been missed.

Naturally, he had a considerable effect on debate, but never to any really useful purpose. His vast store of knowledge did little to benefit his fellow men. Indeed, his main achievement was to make conduct of the nation's affairs infinitely more complicated and time consuming.

My friend's problem was that while he understood all of the intricacies of the letter of the law, he'd completely lost sight of the purpose of the law. For him, the law had ceased to be a tool to make life easier and had become an end in itself.

Many Jews in St. Paul's day had much the same problem. They believed in the Law of Moses for

its own sake rather than for the way it could transform their lives. They believed that salvation lay in observing the technicalities of the Law to the letter. For them, the Law had become the end rather than a means to the end.

In a passage from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans appointed for Morning Prayer today (4:13-25), he declares bluntly that the Law of Moses can't save. God did not give the Law to the Jews to confer a blessing on them, he says. The purpose of the Law is not to make them feel good about themselves, but to make them aware of how sinful they are.

And this is the whole theme of today's Propers. Indeed, in today's Communion Gospel, Jesus is pointing out the vastness of the gulf is between the standards God has set for human behavior and the way in which human beings actually behave.

The misconstrual of the purpose of Mosaic Law was a source of bitter controversy within the Church. Jewish Christians were requiring Gentiles to convert to Judaism and observe the full rigor of the Law before they would accept them as Christians.

Jewish Christian missionaries were giving the Gentile Churches Paul had planted the same message – causing dissent and dividing congregations. Many of Paul's own converts had

swallowed these teachings – hook, line and sinker.

Paul warns that these missionaries and their followers are destined for damnation, because all the Law can do is make us aware of our sin and conscious of God's righteous wrath. The key to our salvation, he says, is faith. God accepts as though we are righteous solely because we have faith in him.

There is nothing new about faith as the means of salvation, he says. Scripture shows that Abraham was saved, not by his godly life, but by his faith alone. To demonstrate this, Paul cites Genesis 15:6: "And He believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness." In other words, says Paul, Abraham was saved by his faith long before God had made a covenant with him.

In Webster's Dictionary, the word "Faith" is defined as "unquestioning belief." Yet this is an inadequate description of the way Paul uses the word. It is possible to have an "unquestioning belief" in God, but still not have "faith" in him by Paul's definition.

Believing in the existence of God, after all, isn't difficult. Consider the alternatives, and it should be easy to see God is the only logical answer to age-old question of how the universe came into being. But a vague belief in God's existence isn't what Paul's talking about. What virtue is there in believing in the obvious? The faith that Paul is talking about might best be expressed as "full faith and trust."

Take Paul's example, Abraham: When God gives Abraham a command he obeys, even though God's demands seem utterly unreasonable. When God ordered him to leave Haran and wander, first to Egypt then through Canaan, his command defied all human logic. From a human perspective, it was supreme folly.

Verses 1-4 of the 12th. Chapter of Genesis sums up Abraham's decision making process with admirable terseness. They read: "Now the Lord had said unto Abram, get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy

father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee:

"And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee; and curse him that curseth thee; and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed. So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken unto him: and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed Haran."

From a human perspective, it was supreme folly. Nobody in Haran had heard of this strange new God other than Abraham. This God was totally alien to Haran's culture. The city was the center of the cult of the Moon Goddess Sin. Abraham's friends must have thought him completely crazy to abandon the physical and financial security Haran provided.

Nothing about Abraham's decision made any sense. Surely it was possible for him to serve his strange new god in Haran? Abraham understood that God's purpose in removing he and his wife from Haran was to forge their descendants into a great family of nations. Yet Abraham could hardly say this without making himself a laughing stock. He was 75 and his wife was well known to be barren. Some father of nations!

The courage, the depth of faith, the strength of conviction that Abraham showed when he obeyed God's command almost beggars belief. Yet this is faith Paul is talking about when he tells us that salvation is obtained through faith alone.

Mercifully, we shall never be called to make the extraordinary, blind commitment Abraham made. God came to Abraham as a stranger and he opened his heart to him. Thanks to Abraham, God will never come to us as a stranger. All God asks is for us to put our full faith and full trust in him by following the well-posted route that Patriarchs like Abraham and Apostles like Paul pioneered. *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.